

The Way It Is

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The Way It Is

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Summary

SPN_flashback prompt: "Sam catches Dean making out with a boy."

He doesn't like Luke. He's the walking talking epitome of all the crap Sam wishes he could leave out of school: a jock, popular, good-looking in this sort of homegrown apple-pie blond-and-blue-eyed American-ideal way. Shallow, superficial, boring.

Luke is the guy Sam would have made fun of with Dean a few months ago. The kind of guy Dean never ever wants to be.

And Sam doesn't even begin to understand why this time, Dean's practically bent over backwards to be friends with Luke. Luke is everything they don't like; it doesn't make sense that for the first time in about a million years Dean actually invites him to their crappy house after school. Dean doesn't HAVE friends, Dean has never wanted friends. He's said it over and over again to Sam, practically made it a religion: We keep to ourselves, those assholes don't understand, might as well not bother.

Dean's made an exception, and Sam sure can't see why.

Take this afternoon, for an example. It's three-thirty, Dad's still in Canton doing whatever it is he's working on, they got the house to themselves. Dean should be bugging Sam about chores, or going over to the gym for some sparring or something, but he's not. Right now he's in the living room with Luke, hanging out, and Dean NEVER hangs out. The closest Dean comes to that is loitering around the parking lot flirting with some girl, and that's only because he's a walking talking libido around girls, totally embarrassing.

Sam sighs and picks up his pencil, stares down at his pre-algebra homework and scowls. Doesn't make sense. It's fine to have the time to do his real work, school stuff, hole up in his bedroom, but Dean ought to be ragging on him about something. It just feels wrong.

Down the hallway Dean laughs at something, loud and open and happy-sounding, and Sam drops his pencil and glares at the doorway. "Trying to do homework here!" he yells.

There's silence for a second, and then Dean laughs again, still all happy, and yells back, "Get a life, Sammy!"

"It's SAM!"

"Okay, NERD!"

"Screw you!"

"Eat me, you little twerp!"

It isn't even pissed off. Dean's voice has a grin in it, and Sam hears Luke's deep voice saying something he can't quite make out, and Dean laughs. LAUGHS.

The problems are way too easy. He can do this stuff in his sleep. Besides, he's hungry.

It's quiet in the hallway. No more laughing. Fine. Maybe they split. Went over to Luke's nice suburban house to watch tv on that big nice set they probably have. Whatever.

Except if they didn't leave, they're gonna give him crap, he just knows it. So that's why he stays quiet on the way to the kitchen. If they aren't gone, he'll head out the back door and go down to the Winn Dixie, buy something. It's worth it not to have to look at Luke's boring-ass football-jock face, or hear Dean call him "Sammy" for the billionth time, just because it bugs him.

Sam peers around the corner. And then forgets all about food or Dean's constant teasing crap or anything else, because Dean and Luke aren't laughing or talking or anything, they're quiet because they're KISSING.

On the lips.

Sam shrinks back into the hallway and stands stock-still. Can't even think anything at all but holy SHIT. Did he really see that?

Another look. Yep. They got their arms around each other and Dean's got his EYES CLOSED, and --

This time Sam retreats all the way back to his bedroom. Sits on his unmade bed and stares off into space.

He stays in his bedroom all afternoon, skips dinner. Dean bangs on his door around seven, says, "Aren't you going to eat anything?"

"Not hungry," Sam snaps through the door.

"Bullshit. You'd eat the silverware if --"

"Go away!"

"All right, Samantha, you on the rag or something?"

He can hear Dean snickering. "Fuck you," Sam says, and realizes it's the very first time he's ever said that word out loud. Thought it a few times, but Dad would kill him if he'd heard it.

Dean just goes silent for a second, and then says, "Suit yourself." All carefree, no biggie. "I'm gonna split for a while. See ya."

Sam's jaw drops. No reminders about lock the doors, Sammy, keep your gun handy, no We gotta work on this or that, no nothing.

This isn't Dean. This is somebody else. Maybe someTHING else.

"Okay," Sam squeaks.

He doesn't finish his algebra, or work on his English essay. Instead he dives into the box underneath his bed, gets out the stupid notebooks Dad has them keep on all the creepy-crawlies Dad hunts. It's always felt pretty dumb to Sam before. It doesn't seem dumb now. His heart is going too fast, his hands are cold and sort of sweaty, thumbing through the pages, looking for anything on possession. Maybe a skinwalker, doppelganger. Dybbuk? They've never run into one of those that Sam's aware of.

Two hours later, brain overstuffed with legends and folklore and worry, he cracks his door open and peers out. There's no sign of Dean, or whatever is masquerading as Dean. No Luke. No Dad, no nobody.

He bolts down two sandwiches in the kitchen, finishes off the milk, and when the house creaks in the cooling nighttime air Sam grabs the salt and flees back to the safety of his room. Closes and locks the door, and lays a thick line of salt in front of it, then by the window as well.

"There," he whispers.

At ten-thirty he hears the front door open, and somebody's heavy footsteps coming down the hall. Sam shrinks back in his bed, has to force himself to keep from yanking the covers over his head. Somebody taps on his door.

"Sammy?"

Dean. Or not-Dean. Sam tries to swallow, and croaks, "Go away."

The Dean-thing tries the door. "Dude, you locked it?"

"I know what you are." Which is a lie, because it could be one of

several things, Sam hasn't decided which yet; maybe Dad'll know when he gets back. But the thing doesn't have to know that.

The doorknob wiggles again. "Sammy, what the fuck? You --"

"Go away!"

There's a long silence, then the Dean-thing says, "Shit. I can explain, okay?"

"No you can't!"

"God, why do you have to be such a fucking pain? It was just -- You saw it, right? Fuck. Okay, open the fucking door. Now."

"NO!"

"I'm not standing out here talking to your DOOR! Open it, Sammy!"

Sam grits his teeth and climbs out of bed, and takes a deep breath before unlocking the door and cracking it open. It doesn't disturb the salt; the door's hung high and the carpet's thin. The thing outside looks so much like Dean, it's just beyond creepy. Standing there all worried-looking, hands jammed in its jeans pockets, frowning.

"You can't come in," Sam tells it breathlessly. "I made sure."

The Dean double pushes on the door, and Sam draws back, puts his hands on his hips triumphantly. "Yeah, just try," he says.

The not-Dean looks at the heavy barrier of salt, and then back at Sam, one eyebrow quirked. "Man, this is messed up," he says. "You think I'm a DEMON or something?"

Sam lifts his chin. "I know you are. Whatever you are."

It smirks. "Thought you said you knew."

Sam glares, and then lurches backward when the thing takes a big step over the salt and comes right on in anyway.

"That's -- That's supposed to work," Sam gasps, backing up until his butt hits his desk.

"Are you nuts?" The Dean-thing rolls its eyes and goes back to staring at him. "Look, cut it out and let's, you know, talk about this or something. Come on."

"You aren't Dean." Sam's voice warbles, and he clears his throat, tries not to see the way his voice changing amuses this Dean, just like the real one. "You're not."

"Dude, none other." It spreads its arms wide, then shrugs. "Look, it's, Luke, he's --"

"He's one of you!" Sam says. "What'd you do with my brother? I'm gonna kill you, whatever you --"

"Sammy, knock it off. Jesus, what is **WRONG** with you?" It stares at him some more. "All right, you think I'm not Dean? Ask me what we did for Dad's birthday last year."

"You --"

"State fair in Dallas. What do I always take off my burgers?"

"But --"

"Pickles, and I get extra onions." It cocks its head. "Still think this isn't me?"

Sam swallows. "You got his memories, too," he whispers. "Something, it's --"

"I have his memories because they're **MY MEMORIES**, you dumbass!"

"But -- I saw --"

The maybe-Dean sighs and goes over to sit on Sam's bed. Same way as always, like he owns the place. "I kinda figured you did," he says. "Look, it's no big deal, okay?"

Sam frowns at him. "But -- he's a **BOY**."

"Yeah, I noticed that."

For once it isn't annoying. Sam considers, then says, "You like boys? Like, you know --"

"No," Dean says. He sounds tired. "I mean, um. Not, you know. Not **ALWAYS**, just --" He coughs and reaches up to touch his hair. "Fuck, I mean, **SOME**, you know. Some guys. Like, maybe. Sort of. Okay?"

"But you like girls," Sam says earnestly.

"Yes. I love girls. You got it."

Sam wrinkles his nose. "You were KISSING him."

Dean turns a really funny shade of red, kinda purple-looking, and looks away. "No big deal," he mumbles. "Just."

"You LIKE him. Don't you?"

Dean gets redder. Or maybe purpler. "Jeez, don't make a federal case out of it."

Sam narrows his eyes. "You got a BOYFRIEND."

"Okay, that's it."

It really IS his brother, because nobody moves like Dean, that fast and lethal, and all of a sudden Sam's on the carpet, cheek rubbing against the harsh fibers, and Dean's incredibly heavy and going, "Not a WORD about this, you little shit. Not to ANYBODY. Got it?"

It's hard to breathe because Dean's squashing all Sam's air out, but Sam wheezes, "Not a BABY, you jerk. Not gonna -- say anything."

"If you do, you are so dead."

"I won't! Jeez, get off me!"

Dean finally does, and Sam shoots him a glare and realizes he really believes this is Dean, although it's so weird. They sit there on the floor like that, Sam brushing at his hair and Dean flicking at imaginary lint on his jeans, and finally Sam says, "You really like him, don't you?"

Dean doesn't say anything, but before he stomps out into the hall Sam sees that funny little smile, and the way Dean's cheeks have gone red again, and figures yeah, Dean really does.

Dad's home when they come in from school the next day. Dean pushes for details but like always Dad won't say, just looks tired and hungry and asks if they've been working out and behaving themselves. Dean nods and says Yes sir, just like always, and Dad gives him the same half-disbelieving look as always, and that's kinda that.

Luke doesn't come over that night. Instead Dean makes supper, and afterward they get a lesson in how to handle water spirits, which is all Sam figures they will ever learn about what Dad was doing the past

few days.

But Dad sleeps like the dead after a job, always has, and when Sam gets up that night to use the john he sees Dean padding across the living room. Dean puts his finger to his lips, shh, and grins before he goes out.

Dad's not saying what they're doing next. There's no mention yet of leaving, maybe because there's still a couple of months before school's out. A week after he got back Dad's gone again, only for a day or two, he says, but the far-off look is back in his eyes, and he takes extra equipment, camping gear and the newest 12-gauge. Dean asks to come with, but his grades blow, there are letters from the truancy officer, and Dad says to show him he's disciplined by making better than a C on his next exams and Dad'll think about it. Dean looks disappointed, but not as much as he did not very long ago.

The next afternoon Sam walks by Dean and Luke sitting too close together on the couch, and rolls his eyes.

When he comes back with cookies and a glass of milk, the too-close is WAY-too-close, and Sam rolls his eyes again and mumbles, "Gross," and keeps going to his room.

He only comes out to pee a couple of times, and doesn't see Dean or his lame boyfriend again before going to sleep.

It's Saturday the next day, and Sam goes into the kitchen and finds Dean and Luke sitting at the table eating breakfast.

"Oh," Sam says, and sighs.

Luke blushes and gives Dean the most disgustingly smitten look on the planet. Dean gets red again and shrugs and smiles back, and Sam wants to barf.

He pours milk into his cereal and chokes it down standing by the sink, tries not to hear the way they sound, the way Dean's voice isn't as sharp and smart-ass as it usually is, and Luke doesn't sound half as stupid as he looks.

By the time he's drunk the leftover milk, he really, really hates Luke.

Luke hangs around the house all day, like a bad smell, and then Dean says something vague about catching a movie and grabbing a burger

and see you later, Sammy, oh by the way, lock the doors, remember, and they split around sundown.

He goes to bed before Dean comes back from his night out with his boring-ass boyfriend, and the next morning Sam gets out the breakfast stuff and they eat in silence that's not exactly right, but not BAD.

"It's Saturday," Sam says, watching Dean drink coffee. Sam hates the taste of coffee, but Dean's always saying he can't deal without it, and Sam's had the proper measurements for coffee hammered into him since he can remember, so he guesses it tastes fine. "What are you gonna do?"

Dean shrugs and pushes his plate away. "Dunno. Dad should be back soon. He said this weekend. We should clean this shithole up."

He doesn't look like he wants to do that any more than Sam does. "I can do it," Sam blurts. "Aren't you gonna hang out with Luke?"

"Maybe later. Dude, Dad comes back right now? He'll kick our asses."

Sam nods.

"Come on." Dean grins and picks up their plates. "We'll flip, loser gets the bathroom."

Of course Sam gets the bathroom, but while it's sure not his favorite chore it's not so bad he can't deal. And Dean's singing some crap song while he strips the beds and sweeps the floors, and they team up to clean the kitchen, and Sam's laughing at some bad joke Dean heard at school when the front door bangs open and Dad says, "Boys?"

Dean's grin wavers and disappears; he looks older, sober while he flings the cleaning rag in the sink. "Yeah, Dad. How'd it go?"

In the living room, Dad looks like he went twelve rounds with something disgusting and lost. He's smeared with grotty black fluid, he has five big scratches down his left cheek, and he's holding his left arm funny. His grin, though, is classic. "I could complain, but -- Nah. You boys been cleaning or something? Smells like Lysol."

Sam makes a face at the black stuff. "You okay? Did you hurt your arm?"

Dad keeps on grinning and shakes his head. "Only a flesh wound."

If Dad's quoting Monty Python, then it really did go well. Sam relaxes while Dean asks if he wants something to eat, and Dad says no, just some shut-eye, and then looks down at himself and adds, "After a shower, I guess, huh?"

Dean purses his lips. "Might wanna."

"Figures."

Sam's thinking dour thoughts about Dad and his black goop all over his clean bathroom, when Dad snaps his fingers and turns. "Dean."

"Yessir," Dean says.

"I told Roger Ames I'd pick up those bullets today. Up in Montgomery. You want to take the car, go take care of that for me?"

Sam blinks a few times. It's more than a Python good mood, it's possibly a dangerously-high-fever good mood. Dad doesn't smell like booze -- booze might actually be a distinct improvement over how Dad DOES smell right now -- but if he isn't drunk or feverish he must be in a SERIOUSLY good mood if he's offering Dean the car for the day.

Dean's eyes light up like a jack-o-lantern. "The baby? I mean. Yes, sir. No problem."

"Take Sammy, keep an eye on him."

Sam rolls his eyes. "I'm right HERE," he mumbles.

"You go, get the job done, get back here before six. No fucking around, Dean, not like Tampa."

Sam barely hides a smirk.

"Not like Tampa," Dean agrees, flushing a little.

"No drinking. And no cigarettes. You think I don't smell it?"

Sam isn't really sure how Dad can smell anything at all, stinking like he does, but it doesn't really surprise him, either. Dean keeps on nodding, and when Dad cuts Sam a look he nods fast, too. "Good boys," Dad says slowly. He takes out his wallet, liberally smeared with goop, and digs out some bills. "Gear's already paid for. You'll need gas, some chow. You want more than that, earn it yourself."

"Yes, sir." When Dad turns back to the bathroom, Dean lets out a little smirk.

Of course, instead of him and Dean heading up the 90-minutes-or-so to Montgomery themselves, they wind up a trio.

Luke's standing outside the coffee shop when they drive up, looking all pink-cheeked and football-player-y and perfect, and Dean reaches over Sam to open the door and says, "Back seat."

Sam stares at him, and Dean purses his lips and blows him a kiss and says, "Shotgun's driver's choice."

Dean waggles his eyebrows, and Sam mutters, "Dick," very quietly while he crawls out of the Impala. He gives Luke a sour look on the way, and flings himself into the back seat.

There may actually be a God, though, because Luke just sits and Dean just drives. There's no kissing and stuff. Or so he thinks, until they get past the city limits and near the highway, and Dean puts his arm up on the back of the seat and Sam can see his fingers touching Luke's NECK, and he doesn't close his eyes fast enough to miss seeing the stupid little smile Luke gives him.

Stupid, and kinda -- triumphant.

Sam sits up sharply. He's been going about this entirely the wrong way. All that time spent worrying about Dean being replaced by a shapeshifter or skinwalker or something, and he's never considered the possibility that none of it is happening because of DEAN at all.

Besides, Luke's like, the last person on the PLANET anyone would think was any kind of funky weird supernatural being. If any normal person ever even thought that at all, which Sam doubts.

Incubus. But if he were, then they'd probably be doing something really gross in the front seat right now instead of just giving each other really stupid moony looks and -- oh crap, there's a kiss, but at least there's no visible tongue -- and Dean wouldn't be able to control himself, right? Well, as much as Dean ever controls himself, Sam thinks bleakly.

So it's maybe a curse. Or a spell. It's a love spell, and that explains why Dean, who has never ever looked at anyone but girls with anything like that hot gleam in his eye, has suddenly turned into

Sam's totally gay brother.

It's simple, and he has NO idea why he hasn't realized it until now.

Dean laughs at something Luke says, and Sam shivers and tries to remember what Dad said about facing a full-out sorcerer.

They eat burgers at a downtown place in Montgomery, and outside Dean frowns and says, "Maybe you guys ought to stay here. I'll be back in a few."

Sam opens his mouth to protest -- don't leave me with this freak -- and Luke says, "So what are you picking up, anyway?"

Dean shrugs. "Some crap for our dad. But see, this guy, this friend of his -- he doesn't like strangers." He's standing too close to Luke for comfort -- this is, after all, Montgomery, Alabama, not exactly the most forward-thinking place on the planet -- but doesn't do anything that'd really get anybody's attention. A lingering touch on Luke's broad shoulder, that's all.

Sam keeps on frowning. Proof that Dean's not himself: Dad would skin him alive if he knew Dean was going to leave him with this guy and head off by himself. "Take me with you," he says, giving Dean his most earnest look. "I won't get in the way."

"Nah, you just hang with Luke here." Dean barely looks at him. Totally misses the beseeching expression. "Have an ice cream. I'll be back before you know it. Luke, you keep an eye on him?"

"You suck," Sam says, which Dean pays absolutely zero attention to, too busy making googly-eyes at Luke.

He watches the car swerve off into traffic, and shoves his hands in his pockets.

"Ice cream doesn't sound bad," Luke says behind him.

"You can fool him," Sam says, still watching the Impala disappearing ahead. "But you can't fool me. I know your secret."

There's a silence, and then Luke says, "You do?"

"Uh-huh."

"Okay."

Sam turns and squints at Luke. Luke's taller, Luke's a linebacker for crying out loud, probably benches 150 pounds with each hand, but Sam feels curiously unafraid. Dean wouldn't have left him alone with Luke if he were truly dangerous.

"I'm gonna tell him, too," Sam says. He shades his eyes with his hand and smiles.

Luke looks uncertain, and then shrugs. "You still want ice cream?"

They eat their chocolate sundaes in silence. Sam alternates between staring at the big clock over the cashier's desk and staring out the window hoping to see a big black muscle car pull up at the curb. Roger lives in some trailer park out by the highway, which isn't that far; it can't take Dean very long.

When the ice cream's gone Luke says, "So how's school?"

Sam lets his spoon clatter in the glass dish and shrugs. "Okay," he says, looking away. "What kind of spell did you use?"

"Spell?"

"On Dean." Sam looks back, sees the total innocence on Luke's dumb face. "I'm not stupid," Sam adds levelly. "Even if he doesn't see it."

Luke studies him for a moment, and Sam sits back: Luke may look like a Neanderthal, but there's sharp intelligence in his narrowed blue eyes. After all, warlocks are probably not stupid, even if they act that way. He may have underestimated his opponent.

"You're a really weird kid, you know that?" Luke says, and smiles a little.

"And you're --"

"Then again I'm a queer football player," Luke adds. The smile is gone; he stares down into his empty ice-cream dish, shrugs a little. "Guess I know from weird."

Sam isn't quite sure what to say to that. You tricked my brother, you did something to make him be with you, only that sad look says Luke knows some things. Like maybe things Sam doesn't, hasn't thought about.

"You're not weird," he says finally, with a snort. "You have

everything."

Luke looks up, watches Sam so long it starts to feel uncomfortable. "You think I put some kind of -- what, spell on him?" he asks. His eyes are way too keen. "Is that the secret you said you knew?"

Sam pauses, then gives a cautious nod. "You did," he says unsteadily. "Had to."

Luke smiles suddenly, a grin showing his big white crooked teeth. "Maybe it kinda looks that way." He purses his lips, nods a little. "How do you know he didn't put the spell on ME, Sam?"

Sam stares at him, then pushes his dish away. "He'll be here soon."

There's a used bookstore a block from the diner. Inside it's cool and spicy-smelling, but Sam keeps looking out the window, waiting for Dean, glimpsing Luke standing out on the sidewalk, hands jammed in his pockets. Sam frowns, looks away.

He has no money to buy anything. The bell jingles out his way back outside. It's hot and muggy, smells like mildew and wet stone. Luke glances at him. "Thought you were into books."

"Nothing good."

Luke doesn't look like a sorcerer. He looks different now, not as big, and Sam looks away, gnawing at his lip.

"You don't like me much, do you?" Luke asks.

Sam stares up the street. Not many people out today, too hot, he guesses. Just three guys, talking, grinning at each other down the sidewalk. Sam's sweating, and wipes his upper lip with the back of his hand. "What difference does it make?"

"Dean's really proud of you. He says you're the smartest kid in school, hands down. Says you got the smarts in the family."

"Dean's not dumb," Sam says sharply, glaring at him.

Luke shakes his head. "Didn't say he was."

Sam edges back against the brick, making way for passersby. "Smarter than you," he mumbles.

"Probably."

One of the guys passing by looks at Sam. "Yo, man, shouldn't you be in school or somethin'?" He has a big gap between his front teeth, and he has the same tee-shirt as Dean: Grateful Dead.

Sam eyes him. "It's Saturday," he says. "No school."

The guy nods, sticks his hands in his pockets. "Hey, you're right. It's the weekend, right?"

The other guys are watching Luke, who's frowning now. "Can I help you?" Luke asks, standing up straight.

The gap-toothed guy shrugs and says, "Maybe."

And that's when he takes his hands out of his pockets, and Sam sees he has a knife in the right before he uses his left to grab Sam's wrist.

"Let's talk someplace a little more private."

Sam yanks, but the guy's grip is like iron. Behind him he hears Luke's startled, "What the fu--", and then a sound like someone just punched him, and they're all moving, the guy dragging Sam around the corner, into the alley. It stinks, like old gone-over milk, and Sam kicks out but misses, hears the guy's harsh laugh and then gasps when he's slammed against the wall.

"That your brother?" Gap-Tooth asks, lifting his chin in Luke's direction. "Doesn't look like you."

Sam twists again, feels his wrist aching from the strain. The other two guys are holding Luke's arms, and Luke is walking funny, like they hit him where Dad always told Sam to hit if he were desperate. Racked him, maybe. Luke's big enough to cream these guys; why doesn't he fight? "I don't have any money," Sam says tightly. "Let me go."

"Now, see, I figure you don't got money. But your brother here -- bet he does. He looks like a big fat rich white kid to me. Don't he?" he asks his companions, and they laugh, and one of them twists Luke's arm and then punches him right in the stomach. Luke leans over and barfs on the concrete. Sam thinks he can see a little bit of maraschino cherry in it, and it makes him feel sick, too.

"Stop hitting him!" he snaps, and pushes at Gap-Tooth as hard as he can. "Quit it!"

"Aw, you gonna cry?" Gap-Tooth grins at him, slams him hard against the wall again. "Get his wallet," he calls over his shoulder, grin vanishing.

They're hitting Luke more, though, and now he's kinda hitting back only it's painfully clear he's no good at fighting. He looks big and strong but Luke's not tough, anyone can see that, and Sam flinches with each blow, kicking out himself and making Gap-Tooth curse when he finally connects.

"You little bitch," Gap-Tooth snarls. "Want me to beat you up like your brother over there? 'Cause I will, you little fucker."

"I don't have any money," Sam gasps. "He's not my brother!"

"I'm his fucking BROTHER," someone says behind them, and Gap-Tooth looks over, eyes narrowing.

Dean's grinning, only it's not like anything Sam's seen before. Dean lifts his chin and says, "Get off him."

Gap-Tooth snorts. "Fuck you. You want some of this?"

"Question is," Dean replies, taking a step forward, "you want any of THIS?"

The guys beating up Luke let him drop, and he curls up, spitting something on the ground. Gap-Tooth drops Sam's arms, and he shoves away, watching Dean like all of them are now. Dean's still smiling, nodding a little now. "All right then," he says tightly. "Who's on first?"

"You think you can take all of us on?" Gap-Tooth asks, and laughs. "Fucking *pendejo*."

Dean's grin just gets bigger. "Oh," he says softly, "I was hoping you'd say that."

Sam scuttles over to Luke, who's sitting up a little, holding his middle. His face is the color of paste, and there's blood on his mouth.

"You don't FUCK with my brother," Dean adds, and then Gap-Tooth snarls and swings. Dean steps easily out of the way, a sneer on his face, and grasps the flailing arm and twists. Something crunches, and Gap-Tooth's face sags with real surprise. He starts to yell, and then it's cut off like Dean cut its throat, just a wheeze of air when Dean's fist connects with his face. Gap-Tooth falls like a sack of flour, and now

Dean's grinning again.

"That feels GOOD," he announces. He's bouncing on the balls of his feet, not even looking at Sam or Luke. No fear in his eyes, no worry, nothing but flat scary eagerness. "Oh yeah."

Sam looks at Luke's stunned face and whispers, "He's good at this, don't worry."

"Jesus," Luke gasps, and Sam pats his shoulder.

It's clear the other two muggers aren't sure if they want to stick around or fight, but Dean takes the decision out of their hands. He's all smooth movement, fast and scary, and they never have a chance. An elbow in one guy's face, blood gushing suddenly from his nose, and Dean wraps his arm around the guy's throat and lets him dangle while he sinks his right fist into the third guy's belly, grins at him bowing at the waist and brings his knee up sharply. Third guy's head snaps back, and Dean doesn't even watch him fall. Looks back at the guy sagging in his grip, face smeared with blood, and Dean gives him almost a fond look, shakes his head once and then punches him, quick and neat. The guy's eyes roll back in his head, and he makes no sound as he folds onto the concrete.

Dean takes a deep breath, rolls his head on his neck and shakes out his hands. His look at Sam is hot and fiercely triumphant. Then it darkens, and he walks over, dropping to his knees and touching Sam's cheek with all the gentleness that was missing before.

"Did he hurt you?" Dean asks intensely. "You okay?"

Sam nods fast. "I'm fine. He didn't hurt me bad."

"Fucker." Dean's nostrils flare, and he grips Sam's shoulder and pulls him into a tight hug. "Shoulda killed him."

"No," Sam says against Dean's leather-clad shoulder. "It's okay."

"Jesus, Sammy. Scared the shit out of me."

"Luke. They beat up Luke."

Dean's grip doesn't loosen. Over Sam's head he calls, "Luke? You okay?"

Sam doesn't hear Luke say anything. And Dean still hasn't let go. Sam

can feel Dean's heart pounding, thrumming like a fast bass beat through his skin.

"Jesus, Sammy," Dean whispers again, and hugs him tighter.

The ride back to Enterprise is quiet, and weird. For one thing, Sam's sitting up front now, not Luke. In fact Dean hasn't paid much attention to Luke, really. There's been no lovey-dovey stuff, nothing beyond a quick look at Luke's injuries, an absent nod, "You'll be all right. Get worse in a scrimmage."

Luke says nothing while they drive, seated behind Dean in the back seat, staring out the window. Sam looks back, thinks about telling him not to worry, that not everyone can be good at fighting, Dean's been doing this for a really long time and it's okay. But Dean reaches out and ruffles his hair, clasps his shoulder and says, "Gotta work on your self-defense, dude," and Sam feels a flood of relief like cool water, gladness at that touch, at the intensity of Dean's gaze. It feels -- right, and so he doesn't tell Luke anything, but sits in the passenger seat and thinks, Shotgun's driver's choice.

They drop off Luke in front of a low, rambling house in a quiet, upscale neighborhood. Dean gets out, but even from inside the car Sam can see the distance between them, and Luke's face is cautious under the bruises, his bright intelligent eyes wary.

"Sorry about that." Dean looks awkward suddenly, shifting from one foot to the other. "You know."

"You." Luke sounds funny, voice a little too high and hoarse. "You could have killed them. Back there."

"Nah. Just gave 'em a little lesson, that's all. Don't mess with my brother."

They messed with Luke, too, Sam thinks. More than him. But Dean doesn't say that, and Luke gives a slow nod and turns away.

"Wanna come over tomorrow?" Dean asks. "Hang out?"

Luke looks back over his shoulder. His bruised face is unfamiliar, distant. "Maybe," he says.

"Okay," Dean says after a moment. "See you."

"Yeah. See you, Dean."

At the house Dean washes his hands, wraps his split knuckles with tape and goes to see if there's anything they can have for dinner. Dad is asleep, only wakes up long enough to make sure they're home, and they eat by themselves, keeping their voices down so they don't disturb him.

"You gonna call him?" Sam asks through a mouthful of meatloaf.

"Who? Luke?" Dean doesn't look up from his plate. "He's okay."

"Doesn't know how to fight."

Dean shakes his head slowly. "No. Not like that. Maybe that's good."

Sam frowns and takes a drink of milk. "You did good," he announces.

"Yeah." Dean smiles a little. It looks sort of sad. "I kicked ass, didn't I?"

"Sure did."

Dean takes a bite of his food, and looks away.

Luke doesn't come over the next day. Dean says nothing about what happened to their father. Just gives him the package, nods when Dad asks if Roger's doing all right.

And Luke doesn't come over all the next week. On Thursday evening Sam asks, "Did you have a fight or something?"

Dean doesn't look up from sharpening his knife. "Nah."

"Then why doesn't he come over?"

"Dunno. Don't worry about it."

On Saturday, while Dean changes the oil in the Impala, Sam asks, "Did you break up?"

Dean doesn't say anything, stares at the underside of the car and lays the wrench by his hip. Finally he says, "Guess so."

Sam leans forward, elbows propped on his hips. "Was it because of last week?"

"Guess so."

"But why --"

"Jesus, Sammy, would you let me do this? Go read a book or something, Christ."

Sam bites his lip, and thinks about saying, But you really liked him. I know you did. But he doesn't, just goes back into the house, sees Dad studying his journal, and goes into his room.

School's out two weeks later. Dean picks Sam up, grinning when Sam says he got A's on all his exams, says, "Figures, brainiac."

"Dean?" Sam asks, when they're almost home. "Do you miss Luke?"

Dean snorts and signals for his turn. "What kind of a question is that?"

"But I thought you liked him. Didn't you like him?"

Dean squints in the sun and says, "Dad said something about Illinois this morning. I think we're leaving soon."

"Already?" Sam sags back against the seat, feels the brightness of the day ebbing. "Aw, man."

"Hey, it's what we do. Shut up."

"I don't wanna leave."

"Well, sometimes we gotta. The way it is."

"Don't have to," Sam mutters. "Not always."

"Yeah, well, this time we do."

They pull up in the cracked driveway, and Dean's disappeared in the house before Sam remembers Dean never answered his last question.

END

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